

# 04.

## GO > INDULGE

By David Lida

### El Fuego Puro

RON COOPER IMPORTS PURE AGAVE MEZCAL THAT'S SMOOTHER THAN ANY TEQUILA YOU'VE EVER TASTED

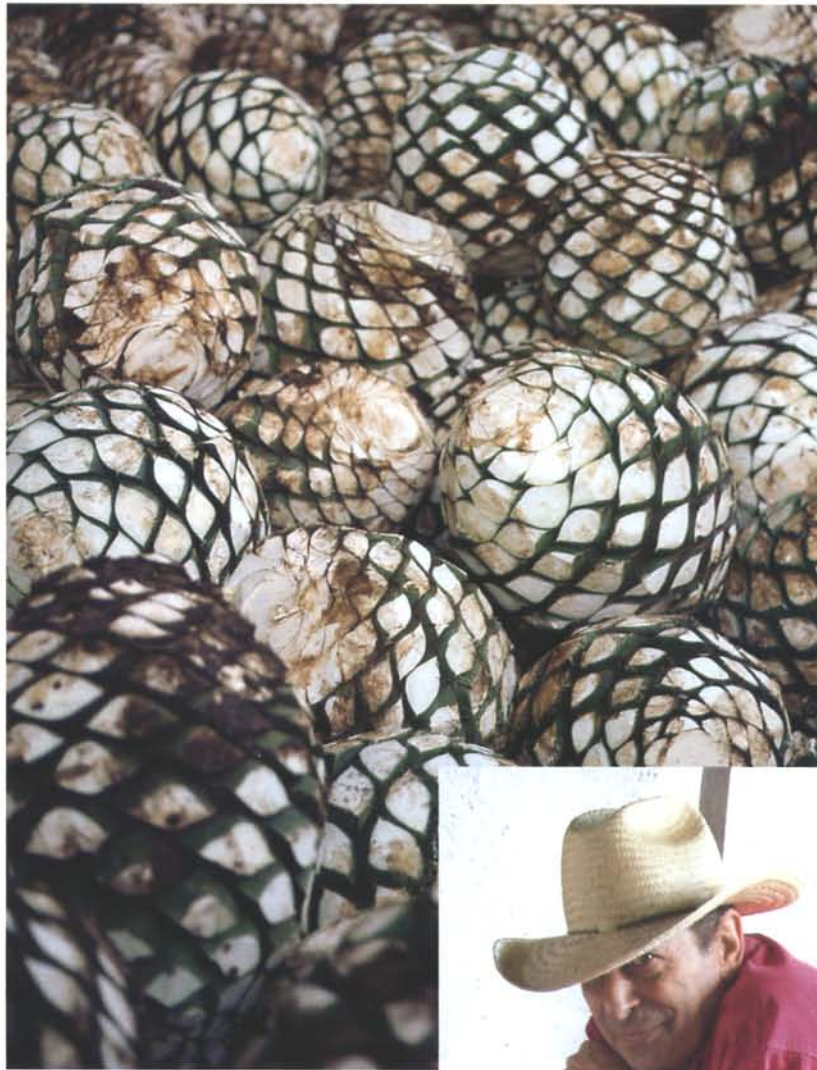
**A** TUSSELE WITH A TIGHT-ASS Border Patrol guard at the crossing between Ojinaga, Mexico, and Presidio, Texas, transformed Ron Cooper from a conceptual artist to a liquor entrepreneur.

It was 1990. Cooper—who made a name for himself in Southern California in the 1960s creating sculpture and installations—had spent three months in Oaxaca making art with indigenous Zapotecs. For the trip home, he'd loaded his pickup with old furniture, tapestries, and a five-gallon bottle of mezcal, a spirit distilled from a succulent plant (often mistaken for a cactus) called agave.

"The guard was a big Texas redneck," says Cooper. "When he found the liquor, he told me that by law I could only bring in one liter. It was a mezcal that had been specially made for a wedding, and I asked him to help me out. He said that I could either take it back to Mexico, or I could pour it down the drain." Cooper begrudgingly upturned the bottle onto the ground. "I vowed that no one would ever again be able to say no to me bringing mezcal into the country," he says.

In the U.S., mezcal isn't as well known as its relative, tequila, which is actually a type of mezcal, named after a town in Jalisco state. By Mexican law, tequila must contain a minimum of 51 percent blue agave, while mezcal needs at least 80 percent (though 11 varietals of the plant may be used). In spite of the similarities, while tequila's popularity has skyrocketed, mezcal has languished in relative obscurity.

Until Cooper came along, that is. In 1995, the first year of business for his Del Maguey label, the entrepreneur imported 336 bottles of



**AGAVE ARTISAN**  
Mezcal is made from the heart of the agave plant, called the piña, or pineapple; right, Cooper kicks back a tumbler of his favorite tippie.



mezcal. In 2007, his best year yet, Del Maguey imported 12,810 bottles, not only to the U.S. but also as far as Switzerland, Italy, Australia, and Vietnam. He attributes that success to the sublime product.

"I'd go from village to village and ask for the best," he says, recalling that first trip, when he discovered the spirit. "People answered in Zapotec [Oaxaca's indigenous language], and I'd follow where they pointed." Cooper says that the farther he got from Oaxaca City, the purer the mezcal became. Today, the five villages that supply Del Maguey are between two and eight hours by road from the city.

I go with the artisan to San Luis del Río, three hours of twisting roads from Oaxaca City, the last half-hour on dirt. It's a village of 300,

FROM TOP: MARSHALL WILLIAMS; ROBERTA NEIMAN

THERE'S  
FIRE IN THE  
WATER

### Global Bootleg

Call it firewater or hooch, but any illicitly produced spirit—whether it's made in Oaxaca or the Kentucky hills—is plain old moonshine.

- > **Grappa** Connoisseurs of this Italian grape brandy look for 160-proof digestifs produced on family farms.
- > **Poteen** Produced illegally for centuries, this Irish barley spirit is now creeping into licensed production.
- > **Raicilla** The mezcäl of the Sierra Cuale, in Mexico's Sierra Madre, is rumored to be both psychotropic and aphrodisiacal.
- > **Slivovitz** This Balkan plum brandy is drunk from Hungary down to Serbia. Farther north it's known as slivovica.



**MEZCAL MISSION**  
Bottling under his own Del Maguey label, Cooper wants to educate the public about what he considers the only Mexican liquor worth drinking.



most of whom belong to four families, according to Paciano Cruz Nolasco, Cooper's local supplier.

Nolasco, a portbellied man in his forties, wears a brown felt hat and huaraches. He receives us on his porch, a perch overlooking a verdant valley dotted with spiky agave plants the color of wasabi paste. His two lovely daughters—and their mother, who looks young enough to be their sister—serve us hot chocolate and tamales in mole. The family members speak to each other in Zapotec.

In Mexico, mezcal is often disdained as rotgut. You can buy it in plastic jugs at tiendas and in tourist traps in Oaxaca for \$5 per bottle, complete with a fermenting worm. "The problem is there's no consistency," says Nolasco, in Spanish. Some producers adulterate the liquor with sugar, caramel color, sulfates, and even urea (a fertilizer). These additives speed fermentation and yield greater production, but of the kind of hooch that leaves you with an unforgettable hangover.

Cooper, 64, who wears his hair tied back in a ponytail, produces mezcals that retail between \$70 and \$200 a bottle in the U.S. Given that you can buy mezcal for five bucks, I wonder why his are so costly. Cooper drives me to the lower part of the valley, where Nolasco makes the spirit, to give me a brief education.

The operation looks like an old movie about Kentucky moonshiners. There is an underground pit where the sweet centers of the agave plants are smoked, huge pots where the liquor is fermented, and a work horse tethered to a pulping apparatus. The liquor is distilled in a pot still. The production process can take up to four months.

Cooper has me sniff his mezcal. "How far does it go?" he asks, his voice raspy from filterless Mexican cigarettes. "A slight pressure in the nostrils?" Check. When I smell a commercial brand, I can feel it up to my eyeballs. "It's full of chemicals," says Cooper. "Don't drink that shit."

The proof, however, is in the tasting. He gives me some mezcal he buys in Chichicapa, one of the villages that supplies Del Maguey. It has a strong presence on the tongue and a long aftertaste, smoky and fruity with

a suggestion of mint. Then he gives me some Chichicapa aged since 1995. Softened with time, it is smooth with a butterscotch finish.

After trying various mezcals, I'm sold. There's a world of difference between Cooper's products and the five-dollar stuff—the distinction, say, between a cheap bottle of Mexican brandy and an XO Armagnac.

Although the mezcal operation leaves Cooper little time to make art, he considers Del Maguey of a piece with his creative endeavors. "All good art has that 'aha' moment that transforms. Sipping mezcal is full of those moments," he says. "Converting people to mezcal is easy. But there's only one way to do it: one person at a time." ☘